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ABSTRACT

An eclectic approach to the teaching of English as a second language stresses the notion of play in the development of motivation. Linked with a variety of play activities, language acquisition, it is felt, becomes natural and meaningful for the student. Numerous examples are included. (RI)

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Do What You Do Anyway!

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In one boys' secondary school, the headmaster said to his staff 'Now what the boys need is plenty of English before they can take part in school life. So we'll put all the boys in one class. You can all teach them for different periods. The boys will get plenty of variety that way, but English is what I want you to teach'.

So the teachers taught and there was a variety of a kind. When Mr. Jones went in he taught nouns, with plenty of long lists of words on the board and walls, and pictures to go with them. Mr. Smith, a believer in the Direct Method, took verbs, and there was plenty of sitting, standing, walking to and from the door in his lessons. In Mr. Brown's period, writing, punctuation and sentences were practised. But it was 'English', 'English', words, words all the time, and everyone was surprised when the boys showed their appreciation by near rioting. How would we, more used to academic learning than these children, react to days and days of 'learning Punjabi'?

How much better it would have been if Mr. Jones, in fact a P. E. specialist, had taught as he usually did, and introduced all the English he could by this method. The boys could have learned the prepositions by jumping over the boxes, climbing up and down the ropes, stepping through the hoops, throwing balls over their heads and between their legs, standing by the wall and crawling under the nets. P. E. is useful for learning adverbs too: walking slowly, quietly, jumping lightly, running quickly, and balancing carefully.

Mr. Smith could have taken Art, his special subject, and taught colours, sizes, and all the language needed for drawing, painting and modelling. He could have been teaching English at the same time as the children were engaged in an activity satisfying in itself. All the teachers could have met together and discussed what English was to be taught during all the usual school activities. In fact, we can all teach English to immigrants by doing what we do anyway, and using these activities and subjects to teach English.

It is even easier to see the possibilities of this in the Primary School. Whether the teacher has a few or many immigrant children in her class, she can look at

FL 001 929

what she usually does from a new angle. She can consider 'What English can I teach during this play situation?' 'What structures can I practice?' 'What oral work?'

That young children learn from their play has long been recognised and of course the non-English-speaker, too, needs to learn about social behaviour, the qualities and limitations of things, and the manipulation of materials. But, most important, play is the best means of learning to speak English. A good teacher of immigrants looks at the play apparatus and toys in her room, writes a list of the structures she hopes to teach, and sticks in inside a cupboard door for constant reference. For she needs to keep a written record of what she will use over and over again during play periods, and will help her class to use too.

During play with sand, for instance, the teacher can introduce the patterns:

I'm playing with the sand. I'm putting the sand into a box.
Sukh's playing with the sand. He's putting the sand into a tin.
We're playing with the sand. She's putting the sand into a cup.

She can encourage the children to ask, in each activity period:

Can I play with the sand please?
Can I play with the water please?
Can I play with the Wendy House please?

The play objects in the water tray can be chosen for their usefulness in language work: different coloured plastic cups and teapots, rubber tubes, big and small plastic funnels, spoons, plastic bottles, sponges, squeezy detergent bottles, small boats, corks, etc. A lot of useful language can be learned during the time that the children are happily playing. Play, and language for play, can go together:

I'm playing with the water. We're playing with the water.
The water's hot. The water's cold. The water's warm.
I'm pouring the water with a jug.
I'm pouring the water with a cup.
I'm pouring the water into a teapot.
I'm pouring the water through a funnel.
I'm squirting the water.
I'm squeezing the sponge.
My hands are wet. The floor is wet.
He's drying his hands. I want a towel, please.
The boat is floating on the water.
The cork is floating on the water.

While making things with clay, plasticine, or dough made of flour, salt and water, the children can learn to say:

I'm making a ball. I'm making a basket.
He's making a cup. She's making a chappatti.
He's making a worm. etc.
I'm squeezing the clay. I'm banging the clay.
I'm rolling the clay. I'm cutting the dough with a knife.

The children can go out in the snow, feel it, throw it, make things with it, and learn:

The snow is cold. The snow is hard. The snow is soft.
I'm cold. I'm not warm. My hands are cold.
My feet are cold.
We need our boots on. We need our gloves on.
We need our scarves on. We need our hats on.
I'm making a snowman. I'm making his head.
He needs a hat. He needs a scarf. He needs a pipe.
He needs two eyes.

On a foggy day the children can go outside and learn:

What can you see? I can see this wall, but I can't see the playground wall.
Can you see the tree? No, I can't see the trees because it's foggy.
Can you see the school gate? No, I can't see the school gate because it's foggy.

House play, play with dolls, gives plenty of language practice. This is something the children will do happily over and over again. The teacher can join in helping the children with the appropriate language:

I'm putting the doll in the bath. I'm washing the doll.
I'm drying the doll. The water's hot. I'm brushing the doll's hair.
I'm putting her frock on. I'm putting her coat on.

As well as free play, all sorts of language games can be learned. Traditional ball and skittle games can be used, as they are, or slightly adapted. The counting-out rhymes used in the playground are useful, too, as are project work and Art and Craft activities:

What are you doing? I'm painting a house.
What colour is the roof? It's red.
What colour is the door? It's blue.

Work involving cutting and sticking is useful too. Old magazines can be cut up for collage work, and the figures and articles cut out of mail-order catalogues. For instance, pictures of children can be cut out and stuck on dark paper. Each child can be made to hold a balloon made by drawing in a string and cutting out a balloon shape drawn round a penny. The cut out children can be given names. The children can then sit in pairs, and question each other about the pictures:

What's Jane wearing? She's wearing a red frock.
Who's wearing a brown hat? Mrs. Jones is.
Who is holding a yellow balloon? Mary is.

Drama is useful of course. A scripted play would be too advanced probably, but a simple story told by the teacher can be listened to, mimed first and then acted with speech.

It is easy to see that many kinds of activities we practise at the moment are

12

useful and lively means of teaching language as well. In this way the children feel that they are doing something purposeful, they can often be learning English and doing something simultaneously, and for them language and living in school go naturally together.